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Viewing cable 06PARIS4411, FORMER PRIME MINISTER RAFFARIN: CHIRAC SHOULD REIN

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06PARIS4411	2006-06-26 16:40	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:
http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 004411

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [EU](#) [FR](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER PRIME MINISTER RAFFARIN: CHIRAC SHOULD REIN
IN VILLEPIN AND SARKOZY SHOULD QUIT THE GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin confided to Ambassador Stapleton during a June 15 lunch that he was worried by President Chirac's waning authority. Raffarin said he had advised the president on the importance of restoring the respective roles of the presidency, prime minister and government, and parliament. Raffarin said that Prime Minister de Villepin was overstepping the prerogatives of his office and needed to be reminded of President Chirac's ultimate authority. Raffarin also said he was advising Nicolas Sarkozy to withdraw from the government to focus on his presidential campaign. Noting that he would be actively supporting Sarkozy in 2007, Raffarin said Sarkozy had both the "image and mettle" to needed to succeed -- campaign to victory and thereafter successfully wield power. He doubted this was the case for Socialist Party (PS) front-runner Segolene Royal. Raffarin envisioned U.S.-Europe relations as an equal partnership, working in parallel towards common goals. Raffarin worried that, although the U.S. and French governments may understand each other well, American and French society are growing farther apart, and that there were no government figures or public intellectuals able to explain America to France with media presence to make a difference. END SUMMARY.

CHIRAC'S WANING AUTHORITY

12. (C) Over lunch with Ambassador Stapleton on June 15, former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin confided that President's Chirac's continuing "absence" from the political scene was worrisome. Raffarin lamented Chirac's waning authority during the president's last full year in office. He said Chirac's diminished stature, along with Villepin's excesses, had upset the balanced functioning of the institutions of the Fifth Republic.

REPAIRING "INSTITUTIONAL DYSFUNCTIONALISM"

13. (C) Repairing what Raffarin termed "institutional dysfunctionism" would require making sure the prime minister respects the authority of the president. He said the role of the prime minister was to protect the president during political crises. Raffarin compared this function to that of an air bag in a car accident -- and "not vice versa." In Raffarin's view, Villepin has managed to use the Presidency to protect himself from the consequences of his own failure in managing the First Employment Contract (CPE) last Spring.

CHIRAC AND VILLEPIN -- "A PAINFUL RELATIONSHIP"

14. (C) Raffarin mused that making it clear to Villepin that the prime minister works for the president would nonetheless be difficult, because Chirac and Villepin know each other so well." (Note: Villepin was Chirac's Chief of Staff from 1995 - 2002. End note.) Raffarin underlined Villepin's attractive qualities, his intelligence and preference for action, while also noting that Chirac mistrusted Villepin's ambition, impetuosity and histrionics. "It must be a painful relationship," summarized Raffarin.

CHIRAC SHOULD CHANGE PRIME MINISTER

15. (C) Raffarin said that "the prime minister should change or Chirac should change prime ministers." Elaborating on his vision of the proper functioning of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, Raffarin described the prime minister as the implementer of policy and manager of relations with the parliamentary majority, while the president occupies the heights of power "alone." Raffarin said that the prime minister "needs to be a team player," and that Villepin's unsuitableness for the job stems from "the professional deformation" of having worked too long at the Elysee. Raffarin suggested Jacques Barrot, EU Commissioner for Transport or, alternatively, Jean-Louis Borloo, Minister for Social Cohesion, as currently suitable replacements, were Villepin to go.

THE PROBLEM IS VILLEPIN, NOT THE INSTITUTIONS

16. (C) Raffarin was adamant that the institutions of the Fifth Republic were not the problem, describing at some length how those institutions had shown themselves to be flexible and effective. The problem, he said, was Villepin's character, "which doesn't change." Raffarin opined that Villepin's blind spot stems from his not being a politician -- he has no experience with the constant constraint of an electorate looking over his shoulder. That said, Raffarin noted that he did favor certain limited institutional reforms.

FAVORS A MORE REPRESENTATIVE PARLIAMENT

17. (C) Raffarin remarked that the majority Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party and the minority Socialist Party (PS), in aggregate, represent less than half the electorate (yet dominate the National Assembly (about 500 of 577 members)). Raffarin said he therefore favored some element of proportionality in the apportionment of National Assembly seats. He said it would be better to have people "like Le Pen and Bove" represented in parliament than to allow them to posture from the sidelines. (Note: Jean-Marie Le Pen is the leader of the extreme right National Front (FN) party; Jose Bove, famous for bombing a McDonald's in 1999, is a leading anti-globalization radical. End Note.)

SARKOZY SHOULD QUIT THE GOVERNMENT

18. (C) Raffarin, who stressed that he would actively support Sarkozy in the 2007 presidential race, said that he believed that Sarkozy would be well advised to quit the Villepin government soon. Raffarin gave three reasons. First, since Chirac could not keep Sarkozy and fire Villepin because that would imply that Villepin was the one most at fault in the Clearstream Affair, Sarkozy would do well to make the move to leave himself. Second, Sarkozy needs a respite from the rigors of being in power in order to get ready for his campaign for the presidency. As Raffarin put it, "being in power uses people up," and was not conducive to the calm reflection required for preparing oneself to lead the nation into the future. Third, Sarkozy needed to break out of the world of motorcades, photo ops and tightly scripted events to

meet with people on a more relaxed and equal basis. Pressed on when Sarkozy would have the best opportunity to leave the government, Raffarin insisted that it should be as soon as possible, that is, before the summer break rather than in the Fall -- in any event, well before the January date that Sarkozy has cited publicly.

CLEARSTREAM

19. (C) Raffarin summed up the Clearstream Affair as a complex matter of "he said, she said." Raffarin didn't believe there would ever be "a smoking gun" since the perpetration stemmed from "orders that were orally conveyed, if at all." He said that the judges had been mistreated in the affair by the politicians, and would take their revenge eventually -- but that this would take time. Raffarin admitted that voters appeared not to care about the affair itself, while averring that they were sensitive to the enmity between Villepin and Sarkozy, which could lessen their support for the UMP. Public opinion would inevitably fault both for not finding a way to work together in the interest of the greater good.

SARKOZY IS UP TO THE JOB

10. (C) Raffarin believes Sarkozy has the right mix of talent and strengths to be a successful President. Raffarin stressed that Sarkozy "has the political experience to know what is possible." Citing the importance of both "message" and "mettle," Raffarin said Sarkozy's strong suit was the latter, and so would have to take care that his message/image is in sync with the French electorate's expectations at election time. Raffarin said he had no doubt that Sarkozy would be the UMP's presidential candidate, and added that he did not believe there would be any other candidate from the majority in the first round of the presidential election. Raffarin said he hoped to help Sarkozy "re-center" his message in advance of the elections, and commented that what was "American" about Sarkozy was his pragmatism and results-oriented outlook. Asked if Sarkozy knows how to listen, Raffarin said that Sarkozy listened as a professional politician, "sensitive to power relations and with an eye on results." Raffarin added that Sarkozy knew the political system inside and out and was very responsible. Raffarin summed up by describing Sarkozy as "what the French would like to be, rather than what they are."

ROYAL

11. (C) Raffarin's portrait of Royal was less flattering. He said that her message/image seems to be in sync with public expectations, but that she lacked the "force of character" to bear the responsibilities of power at the top. He said that as the electoral campaign gets underway in earnest, the focus will move from "message" to "character," the area where Sarkozy was much more tested. Raffarin said that the intense scrutiny generated by a presidential campaign would bring to light Royal's character flaws. Raffarin opined that Royal would fall out of the race before the PS nomination primary in November, and the party would turn to former prime minister Lionel Jospin as the only candidate capable of uniting the left. Raffarin said Jospin was the only PS figure whose nomination would not be perceived as "humiliating" by all the other PS aspirants. Raffarin judged that Jospin would also prove a more daunting challenger for the center-right than Royal.

12. (C) Raffarin recounted that, although Royal beat his designated successor in the race for president of the Poitou-Charentes Regional Council (in 2004), she had earlier been defeated in a re-election bid as mayor of a small town in the region. Raffarin pointed out that incumbent mayors in small towns in rural France are rarely run out of office, unless they have a talent for rubbing people the wrong way. Raffarin characterized Royal as someone who generated tensions, and described her as "seductive from afar, but irritating up close." He added that her focus on image tended to make her think only about the short term. In all, Raffarin judged that Royal was too divisive a figure to play the role of "unifier" that the PS needs to make it into the second round. Raffarin said he feared "a repeat of 2002," in which Le Pen received around 15 percent of the vote to get to the second round. According to Raffarin, even many who vote for him don't want Le Pen as president, but Le Pen continues to profit from the protest vote.

CHIRAC'S LEGACY

13. (C) Raffarin expressed the hope that President Chirac would find some high notes on which to end his presidency. Raffarin defined finishing well as wrapping up ongoing reform efforts and calming some of the current social turmoil and mistrust of the political class. He also projected that Chirac might manage two or three foreign policy achievements as capstones to his dozen years as president. Specifically, Raffarin mentioned contributing to progress reining in Iran's

nuclear weapons ambitions, bringing further improvement to France's relations with Israel and "getting Europe back on track." Raffarin suggested Chirac might also do something to decrease France's worrisome isolation both on the European scene and on the larger world scene beyond Europe.

EUROPE

14. (C) Raffarin said that, to get the European project back on track, the focus should be on "defining Europe as a political project for its citizens," and on providing for a "peace and security" role for Europe commensurate with its wealth and historical weight. Raffarin suggested that France had gone about promoting the EU constitutional treaty in the wrong way, trumpeting the constitution as a work of legislative compromise -- something "mechanical" to make the EU work better. Raffarin saw a need to define Europe for its citizens, focusing on the way European social solidarity and social protections makes being a citizen of Europe different.

15. (C) Raffarin stressed that in a multipolar world it was important that Europe have a role of consequence in the concert of powers." He said Europe should not be a counterweight to the U.S., but should be seen as another voice, alongside the U.S., for the West. On a foundation of "firm friendship" between the U.S. and Europe, Raffarin suggested that Europe could work separately but in parallel with the U.S., supporting progress towards peace in the Middle East and attenuating tensions with the Islamic world by presenting a secular, Western alternative. Raffarin also said Europe could also contribute to ensuring that China emerges as a force for balance and peace.

U.S - FRANCE

16. (C) Raffarin said he worried most about the potential for a drifting apart of the American and French peoples, and not the periodic disputes between the governments. He joked that France always knew when to call on the U.S. when in need, and understood that the U.S. would never be a danger for France. That said, citing France's penchant for seeing relationships through a "Marxist" lens, it was important that the U.S. never be seen as the "boss" in the relationship, as this provoked French resistance to U.S. leadership. In the end, the French people felt close to their American counterparts -- closer than to their UK and German counterparts in particular. The Franco-German friendship was unshakable "because we have decided it should be thus," but the French preferred to travel or study in the U.S., rather than Germany. Raffarin stressed the need for more exchange and dialogue, so that the French could get beyond the stereotypes of American religiosity and violence disseminated by the media. Raffarin said that there was a lack of public figures "able to explain the societies to each other." He focused on the dearth of public intellectuals able to provide the French public with an informed interpretation of American society and U.S. policies, as did -- Raffarin's example -- Pierre Salinger, President Kennedy's press secretary and U.S. network newsman who went on to become a fixture of French public affairs talk shows. Raffarin lamented this absence of American officials and public intellectuals with enough media presence to make a difference in guiding public perceptions in France away from simplistic preconceptions about the U.S. Raffarin said the U.S.-France economic relationship was good, although he believed France could do much more to improve his attractiveness as a destination for investment.

COMMENT

17. (C) Raffarin took full advantage of the opportunity to share some thoughtful, and surprisingly detached commentary on the current French political scene. He hardly mentioned himself, his record in office or his own political ambitions. He made clear he thought Villepin was the wrong man, with the wrong experience, doing the wrong job at the wrong time. Raffarin's evident enthusiasm for Sarkozy and his presidential ambitions appeared genuine and was not expected. Raffarin continues to be seen as the odds-on favorite to replace Christian Poncelet as president of the French Senate in 2008. End Comment.
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STAPLETON